

Up Brexit creek without a paddle

Ferry Biedermann in Amsterdam

There's a great divergence happening between the UK and Europe that very few seem to be aware of but that nevertheless is already having an enormous impact on the nature of the relationship. While Britain keeps getting roiled by Brexit and its ongoing and cumulative effects, be they political, economic, environmental, societal or other, Europe has spectacularly lost interest. A quick scan of media stories mentioning Brexit in Germany and France over recent months shows that they overwhelmingly deal with the debate in the UK, not with Brexit effects in Europe. On a political level, this quite brutal loss of interest was apparently confirmed in recent weeks via European Commission contacts with Labour, the presumptive next party of government. Pushing back against Keir Starmer's idea to majorly renegotiate the Brexit deal in 2026, the attitude seems to have been, no thank you very much. You might want to but we're not interested.

The message from Brussels seems to signal a new turn in the long and twisting road of the relationship between the UK and the EU. It's not merely a slap-down of an opposition party outside the EU orbit. The UK and the EU, and its predecessors, have always regarded each other with ambivalence. From Churchill mentioning a united Europe and the UK's subsequent lack of interest in joining, to De Gaulle's 'non' in 1963 and 1967, to supplicant Britain asking to be let in in 1973, to being the EU-member with the largest number of opt-outs in the 1990s and 2000s up to Brexit. Particularly in later years, also under Labour, the UK kept up a steady drone of criticism of the whole EU project, often making it appear it was dragged into things against its will, while in reality usually getting its way in European institutions.

The post-Brexit relationship is still in flux, despite the EU's 'non' to renegotiating the divorce agreement. There are plenty of areas where changes can and will be made without a wholesale overhaul. Some EU bodies have already signalled that the Commission should be open to mitigating some of worst effects of Brexit. An advisory body, the European Economic and Social Committee, has advised the EU to find ways to allow a "reciprocal youth mobility scheme" possibly including renewed British participation in the Erasmus (now Erasmus+) education and student exchange programme. As of 1 January this year, after Johnson-era ructions over the Northern-Ireland protocol had died down, the UK's access to the Horizon science scheme was restored.

But these are, relatively, the easy ones. It's quite clearly in the EU's interest to keep the UK aboard its science programme. The same goes for a renewal of improved access to UK universities and academic talent. But even a more comprehensive 'youth mobility' scheme could be a step too far. However much we might all rue the effects of Brexit on the younger generations, it could be a hard sell to the EU to allow, for example, reciprocal two-year work visa programmes for people under thirty. Such a policy might seem attractive, as it would broaden the maybe 'elitist' Erasmus programme, but could end up being too much like cherry-picking the opportunities that the EU has to offer. Freedom of movement was the issue par excellence that brought about Brexit. To now allow the UK to benefit from some of those freedoms without signing up to the full package, to me seems perverse. Particularly so if we weigh that against the increase since Brexit in deaths in the Channel and other hardships for migrants seeking to reach Britain, and the damage done to untold numbers of EU-citizens in the UK.

The EU's message to Starmer, quite possibly the next Prime Minister, could be read as making that point: There's nothing major to renegotiate at the moment, if you're not signing up to the whole package. The EU's institutional memory of the UK carving out exceptions and blocking common actions would certainly inform such a message. So would the EU's experience with Switzerland, where it has to frequently re-negotiate each and every aspect of the relations, some 120 agreements for trade alone, to the frustration of both sides. There is a comprehensive post-Brexit deal and that should be it. It's no longer Brussels's problem, but the UK's, is the message. The EU has other things to worry about, such as war and instability in its immediate neighbourhood, energy transition, economic stagnation, populism, political instability in the US, rocky relations with China etc.

The problem for the UK and particularly an incoming Labour government, would be that it too is facing most of these challenges, plus the cost of Brexit. Labour has had to scale back its ambitions, at least for its first term, on the back of global developments and a Tory fiscal funnel that will allow it very little room for manoeuvre, if the party gains power later this year. Starmer is plotting his path to victory over the skeletons of a slew of progressive policies, including his erstwhile remainder position. And, granted, a debate over the UK's relationship with the EU in the run-up to the next elections, could once again suck all the air from the campaign. Opinion polls now show a majority in Britain in favour of re-joining the EU in whole or in part. But once Starmer opens the door to this happening under a Labour government, the debate would turn ugly and it's hard to tell how things would end up.

Yet, this leaves Labour with a serious problem: Undoing the harm from Brexit offers one of the quickest and surest ways to realise economic improvement, very few alternatives exist. But the EU is not playing ball and the issue remains explosive domestically. It will be interesting to see how a Prime Minister Starmer, if it comes to that, will reconcile these opposing economic and political imperatives. Maybe, just maybe, the current consensus among many observers that the UK will not re-join for at least another generation, will start to shift in the next parliamentary term.